

EPA Budget Cuts Trouble Environment Groups

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WASHINGTON -- Grants to state and local governments for land and water conservation would be cut 40 percent, and money for the Environmental Protection Agency's network of libraries for scientists would be slashed severely under President Bush's proposed budget.

By contrast, Bush next year would spend \$322 million for "cooperative conservation" _ up from \$312 million the Congress approved last year _ to encourage more private landowners to protect endangered species, conserve wildlife habitats and do other nature work traditionally done by government.

Other proposed increases are \$50 million more for cleaner-burning diesel engines and \$5 million more for drinking water improvements.

Cuts and proposals to sell some of the government's vast land holdings have upset environmentalists.

Early in his presidency, Bush called for restoring the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund to the full \$900 million authorized by Congress. Last year, it was approved at \$142 million. For 2007, he wants just \$85 million in grants for creating and preserving non-federal parks, forest land and wildlife refuges, a 40 percent cut.

"This is the most troubling budget we've seen from this White House," said Heather Taylor, deputy legislative director for Natural Resources Defense Council.

The proposal sent to Congress this week would trim EPA's budget by nearly 5 percent, down to \$7.2 billion, and the Interior Department's budget by 2.4 percent, to \$9.1 billion.

Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., said it shows the environment isn't a Bush administration priority. "We cannot allow this dangerous trend to continue," said Jeffords, a senior member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

Interior Secretary Gale Norton and EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson said their budgets represent, within the context of reducing the federal deficit, a responsible allocation of resources that will still lead to environmental improvements.

One potential hole in the Interior budget is \$312 million for an Office of Surface Mining program to reclaim abandoned mines. The money comes from coal mining fees set to expire in June. The Bush administration is asking Congress to reauthorize the fees.

"Nobody wants to see the program come to a halt," Norton said.

The budget also would cut \$89 million from the National Park Service's nearly \$2.6 billion budget.

Environmentalists contend a bigger danger is the administration's plan to raise \$250 million over five years by selling 125,000 acres of the Bureau of Land Management's 261 million acres.

The lands are typically part of a "checkerboard" pattern of small parcels surrounded by suburban or urban areas, Interior officials say, and have been identified as holding little natural, historic, cultural or energy value.

The administration anticipates selling them for \$2,000 an acre. The Forest Service plans to sell 170,000-200,000 acres in 41 states, according to The Wilderness Society.

Another proposal affects EPA's electronic catalog that keeps track of tens of thousands of agency documents and research studies, according to EPA internal memos. The agency would cut four-fifths of its library budget _ from \$2.5 million to \$500,000. It pays for a network of dozens of libraries and reading rooms nationally.

"How are EPA scientists supposed to engage in cutting edge research when they cannot find what the agency has already done?" said Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which obtained the EPA memos.

EPA spokeswoman Eryn Witcher said materials will still be available.

"EPA is working to modernize our antiquated system by streamlining our physical collections and making them available online to provide more information to a wider group of people, including scientists," she said.

Low-interest loans to states for treating wastewater, cutting other water pollution and managing watersheds would be cut by 22 percent, to \$688 million.

Bush has requested \$184 million for EPA's homeland security programs _ including monitoring water supplies against terrorists and decontaminating buildings after chemical or biological attacks _ and more than \$100 million for its energy-related programs.